

Only the Intrepid Need Apply

Fueled by an innate spirit of adventure, a young OU graduate could not wait to test herself as a falconer on the steppes of Mongolia.



BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP
PHOTOS PROVIDED

“The thought of holding my own in Mongolia scares me. Hell, yes, it does. I’m terrified. Often I feel little stabs of doubt. *What on earth do I think I’m doing? I’m not good enough for this. I don’t have the skill, or the talent, or the strength.* . . . Then again, there are days like today. I was lazing on the lawn with Floyd, a male golden eagle. How much I would have loved to stand up in heather, in deep winter, with hills and hidden hares before me. How much I would have loved to be hunting, breathing frigid air and tensed for the slip. And then I feel excitement—I feel those familiar butterflies before what you know will be a great day’s hunting. I think, *I can’t wait to get started.*”

Lauren McGough hesitates and smiles. She starts again. Though she writes lyrically, almost reverently, about her life as a falconer, she is at a loss for words.

The phrases seem to visibly build up pressure in her chest, then fade away. How can she describe what it sounds like when an eagle lifts from your hand and its wings strike the air, or what it feels like to gain the trust of a fierce predator? How can she convey what led a 23-year-old to the outer reaches of Mongolia?

“It’s difficult to explain,” says McGough, a 2009 University of Oklahoma graduate who recently returned from a nine-month adventure living and hunting with nomadic Kazakhs in the westernmost province of Bayan Olgii. “I feel like I was born a falconer—it just took me until age 14 to find out.”

A professed Air Force brat, McGough’s family had settled in Oklahoma City when she read a local article that briefly mentioned hunting with hawks and falcons. She soon was convincing her parents to let her undertake a two-year apprenticeship with the Oklahoma Falconers Association. While other kids were at basketball practice or lounging in front of the television, McGough was flying a bird of prey.

“I used to grab my bird, take her to a field near my house and look for rabbits,” she says. The 14-year-old quickly became comfortable with what happens when hawk meets jackrabbit.

“It feels really wonderful when they catch something,” she discloses with a rueful grin. “You walk over and help them get the best piece of meat, and they’re very contented. A hawk is at its most satisfied when it has killed something and gets to eat. And that really is what cements the relationship—if you can catch things together, that’s when they learn to trust you.”

Many hunts later, a now 17-year-old McGough read *Eagle Dreams* by noted naturalist and author Stephen Bodio. The book detailed Bodio’s childhood fascination with Kazakh eagle hunters known as Berkutchi and how he fulfilled a lifelong wish by visiting them. McGough became fascinated herself. She wrote to Bodio and was astonished when he wrote back to share his contacts in Mongolia.

The high school senior announced to her parents that she wanted to go to Mongolia. While most would have brushed aside such an idea, McGough’s father bought two tickets.

“I came back home somewhat intimidated, but also encouraged. That first trip is what gave me the desire and courage to go back.”

But first, she had a couple of degrees to earn at OU.

McGough chose a double major of biology and international and area studies. In time, she said goodbye to her hawk, which she released back into the wild.

“If birds are trapped from the wild, they can return to the wild very easily,” she explains. “When you fatten them up, they lose interest in you as a hunting partner. Spring brings on a hormonal call, and they get the urge to find a mate.” *continued*



LEFT: “There is no difference between what you are doing and what was done a thousand years ago,” McGough says of hunting with her eagle, Alema. “It’s very timeless — you feel like you’re living in *National Geographic*.”



McGough says Kukan was “a natural teacher” who was grateful to offer skills passed down by his father and grandfather.

McGough missed flying. Her thoughts turned frequently to flying eagles, but her prospects were not good.

“The only way I could fly an eagle was to go abroad,” she says, clarifying that although U.S. wildlife regulations are very strict regarding eagle ownership, hunting with golden eagles is practiced throughout Western Europe and Asia.

OU’s Education Abroad program offered the perfect compromise. McGough spent a blissful semester studying at the University of Glasgow and hopping the train to Edinburgh on weekends to fly eagles with friends she found through the falconry network.

“For me, falconry is flying golden eagles on open moorland after the enigmatic mountain hare,” McGough wrote in her blog, “Aquilling.”

“It continually causes that ache in my bones and wonderful knots in my stomach. I could be confined to those hills for a lifetime, and the flights would never lose their surprise and magic.”

But she could not stay for a lifetime. McGough returned to Norman more determined than ever to learn the ancient roots of eagle hunting in Mongolia. A presentation by OU Fulbright Program Adviser Karl Rambo gave her the key to achieving her dream. McGough applied for and won a prestigious Fulbright Grant for Study and Research Abroad to live and hunt with the Berkutchi. She was given a budget of \$15,000. Everything else was up to her.

“I don’t know if I really knew what I was in for,” McGough confesses with a laugh.

Her former professor, Gary Schnell, says the young ornithologist’s journey would be a “fantasy sojourn” for most scientists.

“This certainly has been the most unusual post-graduate undertaking by any student I have known in my 41 years here at OU,” says Schnell, who serves as professor of zoology and curator of birds for the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History. “I applaud her initiative—what an adventure.”

The adventure had a bumpy start. Mindful of the fact that “domestic airlines in Mongolia are notoriously bad,” McGough chose ground transportation to take her from the Mongolian capital to Bayan-Olgii, a jumping-off point for the Mongolian steppes where eagle hunters live. The bus trip took 63 continuous hours: An exhausted McGough met up with her translator and set off yet again to find a mentor.

“I was looking for these pockets of real tradition,” she says, adding that the natural choice was Daluun. Near the border of China, Daluun is sparsely inhabited by Kazakh shepherds who travel with their livestock between winter and summer camps. They live in “gers,” which McGough described as “squashed teepees,” in warm weather and in small adobe houses during the winter months.

“If you see a ger or house, it’s totally polite to just walk right in,” she says, noting that she and her translator spent a week interviewing eagle hunters before being sent to the home of a man named Kukan.

But Kukan had gone hunting. McGough waited with his adult daughters for five hours, carefully observing the many signs



LEFT: Handlers and eagles alike celebrate over a successful hunt. Although the fox is just a dot on the horizon, eagles often spot them before a human relying on binoculars.

BELOW: McGough holds a young eagle that one day may contribute to the Berkutchi way of life.



that she was in the home of a successful hunter. When Kukan returned, he told McGough that eagle hunting had been in his family for many generations, yet none of his five sons wanted to learn the art. She asked if he would be willing to teach her how to be a Berkutchi. He happily agreed. Kukan slaughtered a sheep and invited his family and friends to a feast welcoming McGough.

“Their hospitality is amazing. They’re very poor, but they’ll share everything they have with you,” she says.

McGough moved in with Kukan’s family. For 12 days in October, she and Kukan huddled behind blinds and traveled nearly 70 miles by horse to lure and trap a golden eagle. One afternoon, her small, sturdy horse stumbled into a snow-covered hole. McGough was thrown, her foot still dangling from the stirrup.

“Before anyone could do anything, the horse was galloping and dragging me with it. It was pretty bad; I thought I was going to die at the time,” she says. “I could feel the horse’s hooves glancing off of my head.”

McGough was dragged across snow-covered rocks for 75 yards. When the horse stopped, she had deep cuts on her legs and stomach. She resorted to bathing her wounds in an icy river to ward off gangrene.

“It was an exercise in pain,” she laughs of the riding days that followed. Finally, McGough caught her eagle. She named her Alema, Kazakh for “Milky Way,” in tribute to the stars shining clearly in the Mongolian night sky.

McGough rapidly earned Alema’s trust as a hunting partner. Only a month after being captured, Alema flew from her arm

and took a fox, the eagle's natural prey and a source of clothing and status for the Kazakh people. They returned home triumphant and another feast was held—this time to welcome McGough to the ranks of the Berkutchi.

She and Kukan soon were hunting several days each week. On horseback, they would climb to the snowy top of a mountain range overlooking the vast Mongolian steppes. Once a fox was spotted sprinting across the valley, McGough would release her bird. Alema soared across the plains, then dived like a dark bullet, 500 feet straight down to the fox below. McGough would sit and wait with her heart in her mouth.

“You almost feel like you're out there with your bird. It seems gravity-defying,” she says. “That's really why falconers do what they do—to be able to watch the bird fly. For something that big to be so fast and maneuverable and capable is really amazing. To see nature come up with a design like that is an incredible treasure.

“You're freezing, and you're miserable, and your hands and feet are ice, and you just want to go home, but in that moment when the fox flushes, and the eagle flies, and she catches it? You feel like a million dollars. You're not cold anymore; you're whooping and shouting and galloping down to your eagle.”

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Partnered only with horse and bird, the Berkutchi search the vast Mongolian plains for game to feed their families through the winter. Though temperatures drop below freezing, McGough says watching her eagle fly is worth every minute in the cold.



In the Berkutchi household, animals eat before people. McGough followed the Berkutchi tradition of feeding Alema from a bowl, believing that the practice builds trust and acceptance between the powerful raptor and its trainer.



Falconry is undergoing huge changes in Mongolia, with younger generations shunning the Berkutchi tradition.

The promise of such moments kept McGough and Kukan on the hunt through a long, bitter winter. Temperatures dropped to 20 and then 40 degrees below zero. Everyday life became difficult. A drought the previous summer meant range grass was scarce, and neighboring herds died in droves.

McGough pitched in where she could, trying her hand at herding with Kukan's sons and gathering snow and ice to melt for water with his daughters. She also helped cook the basic Kazakh diet of boiled mutton and potatoes and the occasional dish of horsemeat ("It's almost like venison, kind of gamey. It has lots of natural flavor," she recalls, cringing a bit guiltily. "Mutton is just like eating a shoe.")

Alema had her own place at mealtime. McGough followed

the Berkutchi tradition of feeding from a hand-held bowl, believing the practice builds a bond between the normally territorial eagle and a human. She watched with amazement as Alema finished meals by grooming her beak against McGough's hand.

"It's very humbling," she says.

As winter released its hold, McGough faced the end of the hunting season. The Berkutchi abide by an ancient taboo against hunting during the spring, when foxes are pregnant. Before returning to Oklahoma, she would move on to an eagle conservation project in Mongolia's Gobi

Desert. McGough was leaving Kukan's home—and leaving Alema behind.


"You spend so many hours with them every day, you put all this time and effort and emotion into an animal, it's very sad to leave them. It's hard to have the right mentality as a falconer, because, of course, you get attached to your birds, but you have to remember that they're wild animals."

When McGough speaks again, her voice is thick with emotion. "I was most sad when the season ended, and we stopped hunting, because I knew it would be a very long time, if ever, that I got to see her fly again."

For now, Alema lives with Kukan. McGough hopes to see her someday, perhaps after she finishes a year-long sabbatical back in Scotland, where she will fly eagles and write a travel narrative about her adventures in Mongolia. Maybe while working on a graduate degree in raptor biology, she will get the chance to return to Kukan's home to document golden eagles and their devoted hunting partners before the Berkutchi no longer exist.

"I feel like there is a need for their traditions and techniques to be documented by a falconer," she says.

Back in Oklahoma, McGough feels somehow as if she had never left her comfortable bed and late-night pizza for a world of snow and mountains and flying eagles. But she has—and she is deeply grateful that she did not listen to those small stabs of doubt that told her she could not.

"I'm terrible at horse riding. I had trouble with the food. I couldn't speak any Kazakh at first. But that all kind of fades," she says, looking back with a smile. "It's amazing what you can do if you just try. If you just show up and try, you've beaten so many people right there." 

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